

# Yogic practices (*rtsa rlung 'phrul 'khor*) in the Bon tradition and possible applications as a CIM (complementary and integrative medicine) therapy

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Tibetan traditions have employed *rtsa rlung 'phrul 'khor* (TK), “Magical Wheel of the Channels and Vital Breath,” as part of their spiritual training since at least the tenth century. These yogic practices are referred to as “mind-body” techniques in the Western field of complementary and integrative medicine (CIM).

Focusing on the TK text from the Bon Great Completion cycle of the Oral Transmission of Zhang Zhung (*rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud*), and its commentary by the famous meditator and scholar Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen (d. 1934), I have two distinct yet complementary objectives in this paper. One is to situate these texts historically and report how they are used in the Bonpo lay and monastic settings and curricula today. The second objective is to determine TK’s application in the modern world, giving particular attention to the possible benefits of using these mind-body techniques as part of a CIM treatment for people with cancer.

Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, one of the very few to ever write on this topic, states that TK is the equivalent for the Sanskrit *Yantra yoga*, where the meaning of *yantra* is not only ‘magical’ but also, ‘machine’ or ‘tool’. Norbu persuasively describes body as a tool, which one can utilize to understand one’s own nature more clearly.

There are virtually no scholarly works on TK in English or other Western languages. Garma C.C. Chang’s 1963 translation of the Six Yogas of Naropa (*Na’ ro chos drug*) and its interpretation by Evans-Wentz refer to some of the principles and a few of the movements described in that particular text of the Kagyu tradition. Namkhai Norbu has explained some of the etymology and principles and has published the preliminary exercises of the Magical Wheel of Union of Sun and Moon (*'phrul 'khor nyi zla kha byor*) in a book directed to practitioners of such method from the Nyingma tradition, but it is not directed to scholars. My work is in response to this lacuna, and also to contemporary interests in a wider scale. Although there are as yet no Western language scholar publications on TK in general and certainly nothing within the Bon tradition, Western societies’ interest in this more physical kind of Tibetan practice has been growing. One’s physical body, speech or energy, and mind are known in the Bon Great Completeness teachings as the three doors through which one can practice and eventually realize enlightenment. The energetic body, represented by the vital breath (*rlung*) and the channels (*rtsa*), is said to be the link between the mind and physical body. In fact the TK practices assume, explicitly or implicitly, that the practitioner is familiar with the “channels and vital breath”

(*rtsa rlung*) practices. In other words, *rtsa rlung* practices are crucial in the training and harmonizing of the vital breath, which is the basis of TK.

TK involves a coordination of physical movement that guides the vital breath, which in turn carries the mind. When practiced by the Bon lay community as well as by monastic communities such as Menri in India and Tritan Norbutse in Nepal, it is primarily used to develop one's meditation practice. However, the movements are also traditionally held to strengthen one's physical health and emotional stability as a secondary benefit. Together with colleagues at The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center of Houston, a randomized controlled clinical trial was conducted to determine the feasibility, acceptability, and initial efficacy of TK with cancer patients. For this pilot study we designed a 7-sessions program that included *rtsa rlung* practices from the "Mother Tantra" (*Ma rgyud*) and the preliminary (*sngon 'gro*) TK set from the Oral Transmission of Zhang Zhung.

In the first part of the study, 39 people with lymphoma participated. Patients completed measures at baseline as well as 1-week, 1-month, and 3-months assessments after the yoga sessions. Overall, the results indicated that the Tibetan yoga program was feasible and well liked. Importantly, the yoga program was associated with a significant reduction in sleep disturbances, improved sleep quality, reduced sleep latency, increased sleep duration, and decreased use of sleep medications. Improving sleep quality in a cancer population may be particularly salient as fatigue and sleep disturbances are common problems for patients with cancer. These are encouraging signs of the positive effect that TK might have in cancer patients, and that could also extend to other cancer or medical populations.

This pilot program is one of the few studies of yoga among cancer patients and the only scientific study of Tibetan yoga in any population. A second part of this study is currently examining the benefits of the Tibetan yoga program on both psychological and physiological (immune and hormone function) outcomes in women with breast cancer. By the time of the conference most of the data of this second part of the study should be available.

These studies might help in looking at the compatibility between Western and Tibetan ways of thinking about the body, as well as the possible applicability of TK as a CIM therapy in different populations, acknowledging the difficulties of the translatability of Tibetan or any emic system of concepts and practices into Western terms and understandings.